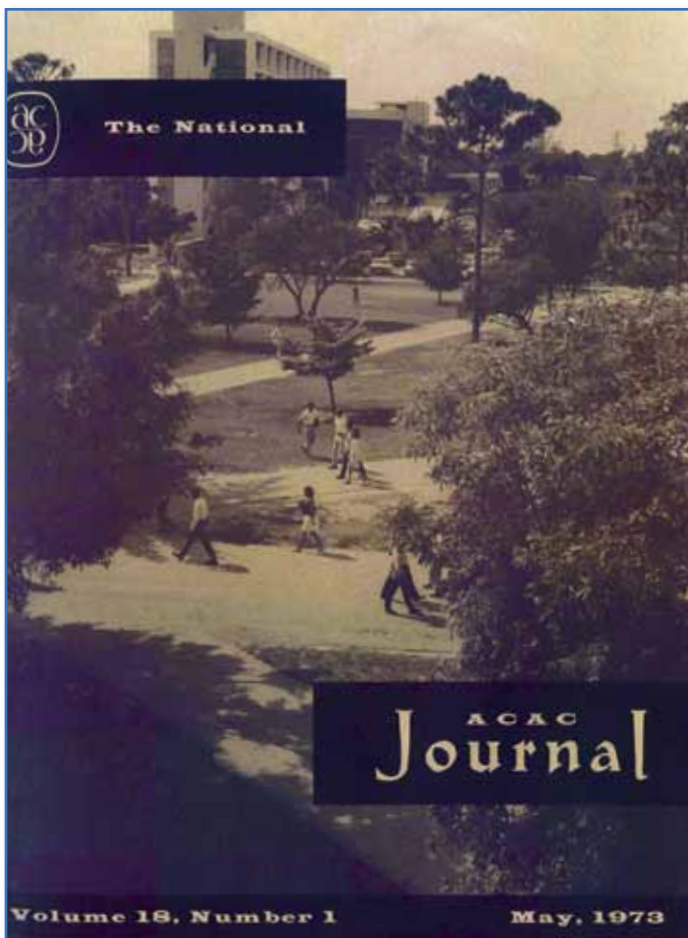


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20 Myths That Can Jinx Your College Choice

Response: "Myths and the College Process, a Retrospective" by Frank Sachs on page 32



How do intelligent students and their parents arrive at their decisions in making this costly and important purchase? Do they do some probing consumer research? Do they sample and test the merchandise? No. And unfortunately there is no Ralph Nader; indeed there is no consumer research available to the public in this vital field. There is much objective data in directories, but few guiding clues to reveal the hundreds of obvious or subtle differences in ambience, values, or character among colleges of the same level.



From 1973: **LOREN POPE** is Director of the College Placement Bureau in Washington, D.C. He has identified 20 traditional myths, most of which have come down from the day Tom Swift graduated from Putnam Hall. He speaks from the experience of director of university relations at Oakland University, education editor of the *New York Times*, and news editor of the *Washington Star*. He says his goal in counseling students now is "to poison the wellsprings of Eastern chauvinism with facts."

"Twenty Myths" was originally published in *Potomac*, the magazine of the *Washington Post*. A condensation was then published in *Reader's Digest*. The following is the original version from the *Post*, reprinted by permission of both the *Post* and *Reader's Digest*.

The shock of discovery that even college graduates of the affluent generation can't find jobs in a depression, much less be able to choose among several, has jostled, but not removed, a hard-rock truth: the B.A. degree is still the union card to first-class citizenship in our society, unless of course, one has an extra thyroid gland.

And the Office of Education's some-what kneejerk reaction—career education—is reminiscent of Soviet Union efforts of recent times to make education policy serve manpower ends. It is not likely to alter a free man's need for a good deal more exposure to ideas, introduction to rational cerebration, and cultivation of a desire to go on educating oneself than our high schools provide.

The four college years is the last important developmental period of a young person's life, and what happens then can and often does have substantial consequences. He can be awakened and fired up to develop himself and his talents, he can plod through largely untouched or unenlightened, he can be frustrated and turned off, he can transfer, or he can drop out. What happens to the majority is one of the last three. Aside from acquiring the credentials, the place where a person goes to college can make a vast difference in his life.

A college education is also the most expensive product—aside from a house—that a parent can buy. It costs somewhat more than two Cadillacs at a good private college, or one Lincoln Continental-plus at a public university in one's home state.

What the public-relations department or a dean may write in the rich-and-noble-prose section on philosophy and purpose may or may not be read by the faculty members or the graduate assistants who confront the students in the classrooms. Indeed, some catalogs now are farmed-out jobs, glossily packaged by commercial firms who provide content as well as cover.

How do intelligent students and their parents arrive at their decisions in making this costly and important purchase? Do they do some probing consumer research? Do they sample and test the merchandise? No. And unfortunately there is no Ralph Nader; indeed there is no consumer research available to the public in this vital field. There is much objective data in directories, but few guiding clues to reveal the hundreds of obvious or subtle differences in ambience, values, or character among colleges of the same level. It would be about as helpful to pick a wife or a husband with the same sort of information. For the parents or the student to fill the information credibility gap themselves would require more time and work than they could reasonably afford.

The result is that the American family relies chiefly on the pig-in-a-poke plan of college selection, which is based on twenty myths that profoundly influence millions of college choices. On the whole, it is such bad consumerism that fewer than 40 percent of this fall's freshman class will still be in the same colleges on cap-and-gown day four years hence. These myths constitute a body of dogma accepted as gospel by the able and the mediocre student alike. Here they are, along with the reality on each, and some tips at the end on how not to let them jinx your college choice.

Myth One: The college catalog will inform you whether or not this school is for you.

Not likely. Read enough of them and they become a blur, because if there's one characteristic they share, it's interchangeability. Diversity, along with availability, is one of the boasts of American higher education—there are over 1,400 accredited four-year institutions, and about 1,000 two-year colleges. One might expect that browsing through a collection of catalogs would give a heady hint of variety, of intellectual adventures offered by educational imagination, and solid answers on how each of these institutions sees its role and purpose and how it differs from the others in developing personal intellect and character.

What one discovers is that, with some notable exceptions, they're all saying the same thing. Education is a status-conscious, follow-the-leader industry in which obvious advertising is bad form but in

which there is always intense competition for students. And the catalog is the chief sales pitch, camouflaged as an internal document. What the public-relations department or a dean may write in the rich-and-noble-prose section on philosophy and purpose may or may not be read by the faculty members or the graduate assistants who confront the students in the classrooms. Indeed, some catalogs now are farmed-out jobs, glossily packaged by commercial firms who provide content as well as cover. Things have not changed for the better since Harry Gideonse, then president of Brooklyn College, said about 30 years ago that if the Federal Trade Commission ever started prosecuting colleges for false and misleading advertising, there'd be more college presidents than

corporation presidents under cease-and-desist orders. It's an even tougher game today to stand for something.

Myth Two: You should make your college selection early in your senior year and have all applications in by Christmas or thereabouts.

More than any other bit of brain-washing to which the public is subjected about education, this manifestation of the Chicken Little syndrome has made a scramble out of what should be an unhurried and painstaking process of investigation, self-examination and decision.

In the academic community only about 70 colleges, mostly Eastern, have winter application deadlines and a uniform mid-April notification date. For most of them, this is a useful and necessary practice. But at least 1,680,000 of this year's 1,750,000 freshmen will apply to and be accepted by colleges that use rolling admissions and never once have all colleges been full. This year most of them will have room when school begins in the fall.

If you're one of the 13,000 or so going to one of the Ivies, Little Ivies, or Seven Sisters, you better be quick about getting in your applications. If you're one of the 50,000 or so headed for one of the other early-deadline colleges, this is true to a lesser degree—depending on how many applications they get—for the economics of supply and demand operate in admissions as in the market, and deadlines don't mean a thing unless the applications pour in.

The number of colleges which this year said, "we're extending our deadline," has been large, as it was last year and will be next year, or until boom times persuade them they're back in fat years like the '50s and '60s.

Across the country, a few excellent, and a large number of good, colleges are glad to get suitable students in midsummer, students they would have turned down in November or December just three years ago. Hundreds of colleges are welcoming students until a day or a week after registration in August or September.

Myth Three: A big university offers a broader, richer undergraduate experience with better teaching, wider selection of courses and a more diverse student body than an undergraduate college of 1,000 to 2,500.

The university today is primarily interested in research, publishing and graduate teaching. One seldom hears a big-university president extol the virtues of undergraduate education. By and large, it is a second-class operation in which even some of the greatest universities delegate 70 percent of the freshman and

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sophomore instruction to low-cost graduate assistants. A term's grade may depend on one or two multiple-choice tests, and there is little opportunity for a chat, much less that requisite for a good college experience—a continuing dialogue with one's teachers. Of the oft-cited claim that the presence of many fine research scholars at the university affects the quality of undergraduate teaching, Dr. Miller Upton, president of Beloit College, has said that the public "has been confused and misled by this false position too long." If the great scholar teaches undergraduates at all, Dr. Upton said, he is only an animated book or television performer in a big lecture hall.

In many state universities, however, honors programs give the top students the benefits of exposure to the best faculty and the most challenging courses. Some of these programs are without peer.

The big universities' attrition rates are higher as a group than those of the undergraduate colleges, one having nearly 80 percent in four years.

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The quality of the experience depends more on the human and the intellectual caliber of the college community—both student and faculty—and on the desire, the drive, and the particular needs of the person entering it. Some persons will only be happy as big frogs in a big pond, or in just being members of a big community where they will find their own group of friends. Some need a brain factory, some only want the credentials, and some a gregarious social existence. The big problem is knowing what one really wants.

Myth Four: A college should be bigger than your high school.

This is a fairly common belief, particularly among girls, if high school has been a socially painful, ugly-duckling stage. But both boys and girls often think that 10,000 or 20,000 bodies will offer a smorgasbord of attractive, attentive members of the opposite sex, more diverse and interesting contemporaries, and more activity.

The number of people is not the key factor. The kind of people is. Every good college or private university is striving for every bit of variety it can get in its student body—in race, creed, economic condition, special interests and social background. No private college does a better job than Virginia or Michigan, but most state universities admit largely by formulas based on grades, class rank, and test scores. If over half of a small college's students come from outside its state or immediate region, the student body is likely to be a good mix. A girl who is transferring out of a college of 1,200 complained to me, "I miss the diversity we had at Walt Whitman High School."

What many students don't know until they experience it is that college is a more mature world in which one is appreciated for one's qualities as a person, rather than as a member of a clique. And it is often easier to know the whole community in a small town than in a big city where one may have to develop a small circle of friends. Since college is a time for testing values and bouncing ideas off peers and teachers, the familial atmosphere of the small residential community has a special value.

Myth Five: Eastern colleges are the best and most desirable; Southern schools the worst; and forget about that dreary and desolate Siberian flatland between Pittsburgh and California known as the Midwest.

This myth has given rise to Pope's Law of Geographic Distances, which is that any distance west from Washington is twice the same distance north or south.

The Midwest has long been a victim of cultural prejudice; the South also was recently damned again in popular movies like "Easy Rider." The truth is quite different.

The Midwest has a century-old tradition of easy access to quality higher education, both private and public, to which some Eastern colleges are only recent converts.

All eight of the greatest public universities, except California, are in the Midwest, if judged by the American Council on Education's rating of graduate programs made by graduate deans and 6,000

scholars. Approaching them are Penn State, Kansas, and Texas, with Virginia, North Carolina, and Maryland a little down the line. The Midwestern institutions, rather than the Ivy League, were principally used for ideas when Britain and Canada started expanding higher education after World War II.

Midwestern undergraduate colleges have done much if not most of the pioneer innovating, and in some areas are years ahead of Eastern colleges. Only in the Midwest, for example, can you make one application for one fee and pick three choices from a dozen colleges, or calculate in advance from family income how much tuition you'll pay. Such things as self-designed programs, wielding a strong student voice in college governance, being able to get a degree without ever going to class or taking an exam, and all kinds of cooperative off-campus study programs, both here and abroad, are old hat in the Midwest.

Student bodies in the Midwest colleges range from the most intelligent, avant-garde, and liberal to mediocre and apathetic. There are few rah-rah fraternity-sorority places, and there is a wide variety of quality choices. And there is a wide variety of topography, too. Areas of Ohio, Indiana and Iowa are more beautiful than anything around Washington.

Similarly, there are yeasty, innovative colleges sprinkled through the South, some with core programs that should be widely adopted elsewhere. Some are making impressive records helping

Affiliate Achiever

Maureen Lawler, College Counselor
Bishop Kelley High School, Tulsa, OK
Great Plains ACAC

Any advice for newbies?

I "lucked into" my job. If it were not for the help of colleagues at other schools and some college reps I would have never survived. If you are unsure ask another colleague—keep asking questions. Don't reinvent the wheel. Many of the things we do in our office came from other counselors and schools. Most will share what works and what does not work. Get involved with professional organizations. One of the best decisions I made was not only to join Great Plains ACAC and NACAC, but to get involved. I've had the opportunity to work with great people and learn from them, and use the resources the organizations provide on a regular basis. I've been a college counselor for more than 20 years and I'm still learning.

underachievers; one now has a three-year-degree program, and the public may not have heard of little Wofford College, but scholars have, for it is often on the lists of colleges whose seniors get the chief graduate awards. Outside of the prestigious and highly selective places, the range of choices in the South is not so great as in the Midwest, where there's a college every place you look. But there are liberal campuses, party schools and conservative ones, with more conservative ones than in the East or Midwest. In some, blacks have been elected student-body presidents, and in quite a number there are as many or more non-Southerners than Southerners in the faculty and student body.

In short, there are colleges in every populous region that will offer you what you want, but the bargains in academic quality are mainly in the Midwest and then in the South. Your chances of getting the highest possible quality for a given grade-point average can be slightly greater or five-fold greater outside the crowded East, where even second- and third-rate colleges are often selective.

Myth Six: The name of the college on your diploma will determine whether you'll get into graduate school or do something worthwhile in life.

You can't get into any medical school with a C average from Yale, but you can with an A average (and good Medical College Aptitude Test scores) from Siwash. What counts are your record and your abilities. And the graduate department chairman, furthermore, may well be an alumnus of a little freshwater college. Being a Harvard graduate may get you your first job, but five years out of college, how you prosper or achieve will depend on your own specific gravity.

Myth Seven: What one or more of your friends says about a college is a good indicator.

This is the everybody-likes-vanilla rationale and is one of the high-school seniors' most-used criteria. The trouble is that it doesn't always work unless you're much like the friends in interests, abilities, value systems, and personality. Similarly, choosing a college

Throwback: 1973

**29th NACAC National Conference is in Chicago, IL.
Edward Babbott (Summit High School, NJ) is NACAC president.**

**The Sears Tower in Chicago is finished,
becoming the world's tallest building at 1,451 feet.**

Watergate is investigated.

A dozen eggs is 45 cents.

**Congress passes the
Rehabilitation Act of 1973.**

**US involvement in the
Vietnam War ends with the
signing of the Paris Peace Accords.**

**The federal government begins
distributing "Basic Educational
Opportunity Grants" (Pell Grants).**



because one's high-school girl or boy friend is going there runs a statistical danger—most college students choose major and love interest at least twice.

Myth Eight: Going more than 200 miles away from home means a costlier education, and probable isolation.

It may really be cheaper to go 600 or 800 miles away, particularly if doing so improves the campus job opportunities or helps you get financial aid. Even if that is not the case, travel costs may not be as great as parents expect. After the freshman year, trips home are usually few—sometimes only two—and travel at student air rates, by bus, or with friends by car is not a high-cost item.

Availability of an airport is often more important than the mileage figure.

Myth Nine: A college you've heard about is better, or at least safer, than one you haven't.

This is one of the worst traps of all. In the institutional jungle, a college president's knowledge of other institutions is limited, and that of the parent or student is often minimal. A conscientious parent wanting the best college experience for his son or daughter has probably heard of the Ivy League, the Big 10 (or some other conference), and the local schools. The student has also heard of the ones his friends are going to.

These "known" schools may be unrealistic choices or unfortunate ones. There are no ratings or rankings of undergraduate colleges as there are of graduate programs. A first-rate college doesn't get in the newspapers simply because it has an impact on a young mind and heart, and the reaction of parents or students often is, "I never heard of it." But many accept colleges whose names are familiar because they have been seen on the sports pages.

When Jacksonville University's basketball team broke into the big time a couple of years ago, applications for admission soared. The college was no different or better than the year before, but it was suddenly a lot more attractive.

Myth Ten: If you're in the top ten percent of your class in a good, big high school and have SATs of 1,300 you belong in an Ivy League school, or a Little Ivy, to get the kind of education you should have.

If this is true, we're wasting our human resources, and an enormous number of individual injustices are being done each year, because less than three percent of this group gets into those colleges. The top ten percent of this year's college-bound army is

the staggering figure of 175,000, and about 26,000 of them are valedictorians. But the eight Ivies take about 5,700 freshmen and the three Little Ivies take another thousand. Lump the 30 or 40 most selective colleges in the country, and their freshman classes will total somewhere between 20,000 and 30,000.

Further, all of those taken by the most selective colleges won't be the upper ten percent. A substantial number will have qualifications of accomplishment rather than of top class rank and A-averages.

Not all the best schools are the most prestigious or the most selective, if judged on the basis of the contributions made by their graduates. In a tally done several years ago, Harvard, Yale, and Princeton led in the percentages of alumni in "Who's Who," but No. 4 was an Oberlin-Williams tie, sixth was Amherst; seventh, DePauw; eighth, Swarthmore, and ninth, tiny Park College in Missouri. The Midwestern and Western private colleges did better as a group than the Eastern private colleges, and nearly 70 percent of the colleges and universities that had even passably good scores were in the Midwest, West and South. Dr. Arthur Traxler of the Educational Records Bureau, who did the study, said, "This would seem to be an effective answer to the question whether there are, according to this criterion, many 'good' U.S. colleges."

The same sort of findings have come out of the National Academy of Sciences' National Research Council researches on the baccalaureate origins of the nation's Ph.Ds. Many Midwestern, Western and Southern colleges are overproductive, and many Eastern schools are underproductive.

Far more important than the glamor of the school's name is the motivation of the student, and discovering whether a particular school fits his needs.

Myth Eleven: Ivy League colleges are looking for students who don't have excellent grades.

This hardy perennial is a nonsensical perversion of something that every intelligent admissions officer has been doing for at least a century. It is often grasped at by frantic parents because of the publicity given a foundation grant to Williams College to finance an admissions-risk program for boys who had achieved outside of school. This was something most good schools felt they couldn't afford not to do.

To be true, the myth should read: Good colleges are looking for students who have something to offer besides good grades and scores. With top students a nickel a dozen, the most selective schools are looking for people who have accomplished something on their own, or who have demonstrated impressive qualities as

human beings ...Perfect SAT scores of 1,600, a B average and nothing else are a turnoff. However, one of my young friends with a SAT total of just over 1,000, a C-plus average, but a good record in the Marines and in a responsible job, is at Amherst. One spring day several years ago, the undergraduate dean at Princeton came to me with what he rightly thought was a good Sunday story for the *New York Times*. What disturbed him and fellow administrators was that in going over the dossiers of that year's senior class it seemed to them that many of the men most likely to reflect credit on Princeton were men of accomplishment who otherwise had been marginal admittees, some with college-board scores in the low 400s.

Every year, predictably, the admissions directors at places like Princeton, Harvard and Amherst express minimal or no interest in students in the upper one-third of their class at the most prestigious private prep schools in the East, but they get excited when you tell them: "This boy has a little better than a B average, but he taught himself calculus in two summers, then took one semester and got a B to prove he knew it; taught himself to play the piano and plays Rachmaninoff; sold more tickets to the Boy Scout fair than any other scout in the county; is an authority on Appalachian butterflies, discovered a species new to Maryland, and has written a monograph on the subject."

Myth Twelve: There are millions of dollars in unused scholarships going begging every year.

This cruel lie benefits the sellers of books on how to find a scholarship, but no one else.

Practically all of the scholarship money given is given through the colleges, and there is so little of it that financial aid is customarily given in a package—part grant, part loan and part job—unless of course you're bartering your talents as a tackle or a forward for a college degree. If you want a scholarship, the sensible course is to persuade a college it wants you, and then have your parents prove, by filling out the Parents' Confidential Statement, that your family is eligible for aid. Except for the buying of athletic flesh, good colleges use need as the criterion for aid.

The genesis of this myth, which gets an almost annual airing in newspapers, probably lies in the old habit of garden clubs, Legion posts, and so on to give "scholarships" of insignificant amounts to local essay- or citizenship-contest winners. And of course, there are some trust funds providing college money for the same-name descendants of some donor. But if you don't know about any rich granduncle, forget it: and the same for other non-college sources, unless it's the company your parent works for.

Myth Thirteen: Your choice of college major is very important, and you should choose your college on the basis of the quality of its department in that field.

This misconception has led many young people down the wrong path. In the first place, the importance of the major is one of the most overrated things about college. The choice of one is something that usually should be firmly avoided or resisted until the junior year. Why? Because you need some education before you get into your vocational training. As John Stuart Mill said, "a man is a man before he is a physician or a statesman, and if you make him a reasonable and sensible man he will make himself a reasonable and sensible physician or statesman."

Engineering is the field that demands the earliest full commitment and it has the highest attrition rate of any field; only 30 percent finish the course nationally.

In the second place, most 18-year-olds know very little about themselves, the world, or the growing variety of choices open to them. Most college students change majors once or twice, and most of the adult world is not doing anything remotely connected with their college majors. Furthermore, a college major won't make you competent in any field; the most it will do is help you get your first job in some areas.

If you're going to be a doctor, the medical school doesn't care what your major is, so long as you have the biology, chemistry, physics and math required for admission. And if you're going to be an anthropologist, a history major is the one favored by the good graduate schools; they'll assume you know no anthropology. And if you want to be a newspaperman, a major in journalism may contribute to the ills that have helped to make it a shrinking field by teaching you how to write a newspaper story instead of exposing you to things of more substance.

Don't pick an undergraduate college solely because you've heard that its English or its political-science department is good and you think you might major in one or the other.

Myth Fourteen: College is hard to get into.

With the depression in the economy and in higher education, this myth is dying. It was never true, even in the panic days. Anyone who graduates from high school can get into any one of a number of four-year colleges. Two-year community colleges usually have open-door admissions policies.

Myth Fifteen: A high school diploma is needed to get into college.

By no means. Passing the General Educational Development test will do quite nicely, even if you never set foot in a high school. Every year I send several high school juniors on to college if they have good records and it appears that another year in high school would be a bore or a waste of time. Good colleges have been doing this for years and years, but they do it on an individual basis; each case is a law unto itself.

Myth Sixteen: Going to a private prep school will enhance your prospects of getting into a good college.

Quite the opposite is often, if not usually, true. A high rank in a big competitive suburban school is usually more persuasive to an admissions officer than high rank in a small private prep school. Private prep schools are of such variable quality that the admissions director wants to know if the school is tough or easy. And if the prep school grades are markedly better than the public school grades, he may smell a trade of high grades for high tuition.

Myth Seventeen: Joining clubs will improve your chances.

Not unless you are a doer as well as a joiner. A list of memberships is a bore unless it's accompanied by some active contributions to the work of those groups. Admissions directors are quicker and more alert than teenagers to spot a phony. Whether it's collecting shells, writing a sonata, or working with kids who need help is not important; but rather the evidence of interest and accomplishment.

Myth Eighteen: A bad teacher or counselor recommendation can ruin your chances to get into a good college.

They cannot if what they say is not true, and sometimes even if what they say is true.

One negative opinion that runs counter to the general estimate of a student is no more likely to hurt a student than one bad grade. Many parents fear to criticize a bad teacher or correct an injustice for fear the son or daughter will "get a bad recommendation." My advice is damn the recommendations and try to correct your school's shortcomings, but be sure of your facts. If there is a teacher conflict and a bad grade, or the likelihood of a bad recommendation, deal with it honestly and in full candor in the application. That will do two things: impress the admissions director and help take the steam out of the negative comment, particularly if it is unwarranted. Furthermore, admissions directors are sensible men who know about human failings in teachers as well as students and who don't believe everything they read. As one of the Little Ivy League deans told me "I always apply the filter factor."

Myth Nineteen: SAT scores are the most important thing: good ones will get you in a good school and poor ones will keep you out.

SAT scores are the least important of the three statistical criteria used by good admissions directors. First are your grades; second, class rank, and third, test scores. The worst risk is the student—usually male—with high scores and low or mediocre grades. He is a pariah because he's likely to flunk out. The best indication of how a person will do in college is how he did in high school. And the person with good grades and poor scores will have many choices among really good colleges. Of course, the formula admissions practices in many big universities make these scores as, or nearly as, important as grades. My rule of thumb is that the better the admissions director the less the importance he attaches to SAT scores.

Myth Twenty: A coaching course will improve your SAT scores, and therefore your chances.

A lot of parents waste money on these courses.

First off, Educational Testing Service, which prepares the tests, says they're not susceptible to cramming, and since they are no more than vague measures of one's command of a cultural knowledge at a given stage of development, cramming won't work.

Second, if after a cramming course, one's scores go up 30 to 40 points each on the verbal and math parts over the year before, nothing has been accomplished, for normal growth should add that much to one's score, and 30 or 40 more points don't mean much, anyway. That's why scores are ranged in brackets of 50 points, they're such imprecise gauges. One's scores are likely to range 60 points up or down if he takes the tests 20 times.

What the verbal part usually reflects more than anything else is how much reading a person has done in his young life. Obviously, if he's done a lot, he will read and comprehend the paragraphs faster and surer, and have a larger vocabulary at his command.

Of course, one should know what an objective test is like, but he can do this on his own with booklets of information and sample questions available in every guidance office.

In sum, myths are things to read, not to live by. And the message here is: stay loose, use your common sense. It's amazing how many surprising answers are found that way. Decide just what it is you want in college and look for that, not for geographical location any more than you would apply that test to your choice of a girl or guy to love. And above all, be a militant consumer. Remember, it's your money and your life and you're infinitely more important than the school. Demand to know the answer to any question that's important to you. And if a college doesn't honor your right to know, it's not good enough for you.